A REVIEW OF TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS IN THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF TEACHER TRAINEES AT THE UNIVERSITY

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	This study aims to assess the level of toxic relationships in the interpersonal communication skills of teacher trainees at the University. Specifically, it focuses on the prevalence of toxic peer relationships among the trainees. Additionally, the study evaluates the level of interpersonal communication skills among these trainees. Interpersonal communication is a crucial element for teachers, facilitating effective classroom and school interactions. Thus, this research discusses the extent of toxic peer relationships and the interpersonal communication skills among University teacher trainees. The study employs a descriptive statistical approach, analyzing mean, percentage, standard deviation, and frequency using instruments like the Toxic Relationship Scale (TRS) and the Interpersonal Communication Competence Skill (ICCS) administered to 298 trainees. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 27.0. Results indicate that the level of toxic peer relationships is moderately low, with a mean score of 2.05 (SD = 0.42), while the interpersonal communication skills of the trainees are moderately high, with a mean score of 3.46 (SD = 0.33). This survey's findings are expected to raise awareness about the importance of maintaining low levels of toxic peer relationships and enhancing interpersonal communication skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication is an essential skill for individuals to meet their social needs. Denanti and Wardani (2020) assert that humans inherently require social relationships, where interaction and communication are constant, helping them thrive in groups or communities. However, the effectiveness of interpersonal communication can be compromised by the negative impacts of toxic relationships, especially among peers. Joseph (2016) describes interpersonal communication as a practical and effective art in maintaining harmonious relationships, whether in friendships, partnerships, or professional settings, free from conflict and toxicity.

Eva, Shanti, and Hidayah (2020) explain that individuals may experience social stress due to toxic peer environments, where differing behaviors, cultures, or attitudes lead to diminished self-respect. Consequently, such toxic social relationships gradually erode self-confidence, adversely affecting the development of interpersonal communication skills.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Roziana and Susi (2019) emphasize that educators' interpersonal communication skills must include both verbal and non-verbal aspects to manage conflicts effectively, particularly for teacher trainees. Their study highlights the need for enhancing interpersonal relationships within school communities, pointing out that teacher trainees often fail to express appropriate facial expressions or build connections with others effectively.

Ng and Faridah (2022) suggest that the interpersonal communication skills of teacher trainees at Universities are moderately high but still require improvement to reach an optimal level. Ong and Tan (2020) assert that the mastery of communication skills among teachers has not yet reached a high standard. Nor Shafrin et al. (2009) indicate that teacher trainees' interpersonal communication skills are moderate due to passive behaviors, often stemming from toxic relationships.

Novi Andayani (2021) points out that toxic relationships are rarely focused solely on interpersonal communication, highlighting a research gap in this area. Siti Rahimah (2022) also notes that toxic relationships are often associated with romantic connections, although they can equally affect peer relationships. This study, therefore, focuses on toxic relationships within the interpersonal communication context of teacher trainees at the University.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To determine the level of toxic peer relationships among University teacher trainees.
2. To assess the level of interpersonal communication skills among University teacher trainees.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the level of toxic peer relationships among University teacher trainees?
2. What is the level of interpersonal communication skills among University teacher trainees?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This quantitative study adopts a survey method to evaluate the levels of toxic relationships and interpersonal communication skills among teacher trainees at the University. The study utilizes descriptive statistical analysis to empirically and systematically examine these aspects, which aligns with Sugiyono's (2010) categorization of descriptive studies.

Sampling

The study's population comprises teacher trainees from PISMP cohorts enrolled between June 2019 and June 2023, totaling 1,321 individuals. A simple random sampling method was employed to select 298 respondents for the study and based on table Krejie and Moghan.

Instrumentation

The study utilized a questionnaire administered via Google Forms, consisting of three sections:
- **Section A**: Five items capturing respondent demographics.

- **Section B**: 20 items assessing toxic peer relationships using the Toxic Relationship Scale (TRS).

- **Section C**: 30 items evaluating interpersonal communication skills using the Interpersonal Communication Competence Skill (ICCS) instrument.

The Cronbach's alpha values indicate good reliability for both instruments, with TRS at α = 0.75 and ICCS at α = 0.71, according to Bond and Fox (2015), who assert that values above 0.6 indicate acceptable reliability.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 27.0, focusing on descriptive statistics to compute the mean, standard deviation, percentage, and frequency.

Table 1: Interpretation of Mean Scores

Score Range	Interpretation
1.00 - 2.00	Low
2.01 - 3.00	Moderately Low
3.01 - 4.00	Moderately High
4.01 - 5.00	High

Source: Nunnally and Bernstein (1994)

Table 1 outlines the criteria for interpreting the mean scores used to measure the levels of toxic peer relationships and interpersonal communication skills among University teacher trainees.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Toxic Peer Relationships among University Teacher Trainees

Overall, the mean score for toxic peer relationships among the 298 teacher trainees, as analyzed using IBM SPSS, falls within the moderately low range at 2.04 (SD = 0.42). This score indicates that most respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the items measuring toxic relationships.

Table 2: Analysis of Overall Mean Scores for Toxic Peer Relationships Among University Teacher Trainees

Aspect	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Level of Toxic Relationships	2.05	0.42	Moderately Low

Table 2 presents the overall mean scores for toxic peer relationships among University teacher trainees. This finding contrasts with Siti Rahimah's (2022) study, which suggested that university students are often susceptible to toxic friendships. However, the results from this University indicate a healthier and more positive peer environment, with lower levels of toxic relationships.

Regarding specific constructs within toxic peer relationships, all five constructs measured scored within the moderately low to low ranges (see Table 3). Notably, the construct "lack of trust in others" scored a mean of 2.40 (SD = 0.77), placing it in the moderately low range, similar to the "emotional and aggressive" construct, which scored 2.07 (SD = 0.53).

The "self-manipulation" construct recorded a mean score of 2.08 (SD = 0.54), also within the moderately low range. The constructs "lying to peers" and "using violence against peers" scored the lowest at 1.84 (SD = 0.58) and 1.90 (SD = 0.58), respectively, indicating low levels of these behaviors.

Table 3: Analysis of Mean Scores for Specific Constructs of Toxic Peer Relationships

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Lack of trust in others	2.40	0.77	Moderately Low
Emotional and aggressive	2.07	0.53	Moderately Low
Self-manipulation	2.08	0.54	Moderately Low
Lying to peers	1.84	0.58	Low
Using violence against peers	1.90	0.58	Low

These findings challenge previous studies, such as Novi Andayani's (2021), which asserted that toxic relationships disrupt adolescents' emotional well-being and impair their interpersonal communication skills. However, the results from this study suggest that the level of toxic relationships in the University environment is moderately low, indicating a more positive peer relationship context.

Rina et al. (2022) stated that toxic relationships are commonplace in today's evolving social dynamics, often arising from differences in opinions, condescension, and personality clashes. Despite this, the current study presents new and different findings, showing that the level of toxic relationships among University teacher trainees is not high and that the overall peer relationships are positive.

These positive findings can be attributed to the personal development initiatives embedded in teacher training, which emphasize the cultivation of interpersonal skills and ethical values, fostering integrity among future educators. The teaching profession places significant importance on personal character development, as it reflects one's moral standing. For instance, University trainees are trained to practice teamwork, exhibit high interpersonal communication skills, demonstrate empathy, maintain openness, and support one another. These practices prepare them to face future challenges without compromising their professional image as teachers.

Level of Interpersonal Communication Skills among University Teacher Trainees

Table 4: Analysis of Overall Mean Scores for Interpersonal Communication Skills Among University Teacher Trainees

Aspect	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Level of Interpersonal Communication Skills	3.46	0.33	Moderately High

Table 4 shows that the overall mean score for interpersonal communication skills among University teacher trainees is moderately high, at 3.46, with a standard deviation of 0.33. Most trainees agreed or strongly agreed with the items in the ten constructs measured. This result aligns with Ng Xuan Yuan and Faridah's (2022) findings, which also noted satisfactory levels of interpersonal communication skills among teacher trainees.

Table 5: Analysis of Specific Constructs for Interpersonal Communication Skills

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Self-disclosure	2.86	0.73	Moderately Low
Empathy	3.67	0.51	Moderately High
Social relaxation	3.68	0.64	Moderately High
Assertiveness	3.41	0.65	Moderately High
Altercentrism	3.26	0.58	Moderately High

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Interaction management	3.56	0.69	Moderately High
Expressiveness	3.29	0.81	Moderately High
Supportiveness	3.61	0.70	Moderately High
Immediacy	3.66	0.68	Moderately High
Environmental control	3.57	0.52	Moderately High

As shown in Table 5, the constructs for interpersonal communication skills predominantly scored in the moderately high range, except for "self-disclosure," which scored a mean of 2.86 (SD = 0.73), placing it in the moderately low range. This indicates that self-disclosure is the least mastered skill among the respondents. The constructs for "empathy" and "social relaxation" scored 3.67 (SD = 0.51) and 3.68 (SD = 0.64), respectively, while "assertiveness" recorded a mean of 3.41 (SD = 0.65), followed by "altercentrism" with a mean of 3.26 (SD = 0.58).

Interpersonal communication skills were further evidenced by constructs such as "interaction management" with a mean of 3.56 (SD = 0.69), "expressiveness" at 3.29 (SD = 0.81), and "supportiveness" at 3.61 (SD = 0.70). The "immediacy" construct recorded a mean of 3.66 (SD = 0.68), while "environmental control" had a mean score of 3.57 (SD = 0.52). Overall, the highest mean score was for "social relaxation."

This study is consistent with Azarul Razamin et al.'s (2023) findings that competency levels are linked to how teachers enhance their professional development, including improving interpersonal communication skills. Social skills encompass teachers' ability to interact respectfully and adhere to the behavioral norms of school life. Noor Afzaliza and Maizatul (2021) also emphasize that personal attributes are a form of communication skill highly valued in the job market. These findings align with this study's results, indicating that the interpersonal communication skills of University teacher trainees are moderately high.

The trainees' interpersonal communication skills align with the professional teaching requirements, highlighting the importance of fostering high-quality educators. Effective interpersonal communication enhances teachers' personal attributes, as it is crucial for creating positive, two-way interactions between teachers and students. Without effective interpersonal communication, the teaching and learning process may become less impactful, failing to foster a close relationship within the school community.

However, a noted weakness among University trainees is the "self-disclosure" skill, which scored a mean of 2.86 (SD = 0.73), categorized as moderately low. Self-disclosure refers to an individual's ability to reveal personal thoughts, ideas, and personality traits through communication (Hayeon et al., 2019). This suggests that trainees struggle to express their feelings, experiences, or personalities, which may negatively impact their ability to motivate and inspire students.

Self-disclosure is associated with positive learning experiences, as it involves teachers sharing their values, beliefs, and life stories with students. This behavior can inspire students and enhance their motivation when teachers share life experiences or learning challenges. Conversely, if teachers prefer to keep their life experiences private, students may find it difficult to relate to them, hindering their ability to face future challenges.

A teacher should possess openness, the ability to receive input from others, and convey output to students. This study emphasizes that self-disclosure in teacher communication can build self-confidence and serve as a role model for students facing learning challenges. Enhancing teachers' openness can help students feel more comfortable and foster closer relationships with their teachers. This openness encourages students to ask questions and be more proactive during teaching and learning sessions, whether in the classroom or outside of class hours.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study explored the levels of toxic relationships within interpersonal communication among University teacher trainees. The descriptive survey study focused on achieving the research objectives of assessing toxic peer relationships and interpersonal communication skills among University teacher trainees.

The data analysis using IBM SPSS version 27.0 revealed that the level of toxic relationships was moderately low, with a mean score of 2.05 (SD = 0.42), while the level of interpersonal communication skills was moderately high, with a mean score of 3.46 (SD = 0.33).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future researchers are encouraged to focus on specific constructs to conduct more in-depth and targeted studies. This approach will allow for different perspectives and methodologies, providing readers with a more effective understanding of the research.

Given that this study's sample was limited to University teacher trainees, future researchers could conduct surveys across multiple universities to enrich the data and compare toxic peer relationships and interpersonal communication skills across different teacher education institutions.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this study for University teacher trainees include raising awareness and self-awareness about the quality of their social interactions. This awareness can help trainees identify their personalities within social environments, ultimately preparing them for the social challenges they may face in schools (Gallos & Joan, 2018).The study's findings on toxic relationships among peers can assist trainees in evaluating their social environments and recognizing their behavior and speech patterns in social settings. This self-awareness will better prepare them for future teaching placements, enabling them to navigate various positive and negative social interactions in the workplace.

The study also highlights the importance of enhancing interpersonal communication skills, providing a foundation for teacher trainees to improve their communication abilities across various dimensions. Previous studies by Ong and Tan (2020) and Syed Ismail et al. (2018) indicated that the communication skills of teacher trainees have not yet reached a high level. Mastering communication skills is essential for teachers to interact meaningfully with students. Therefore, this study serves as a starting point for trainees to enhance their communication skills, particularly in self-disclosure and expressiveness. Developing these skills will help trainees become competent and effective teachers.

The study's findings are expected to aid universities in understanding the social environment and personality development of teacher trainees throughout their time at the institution. Regarding interpersonal communication skills, the institution can plan various initiatives to enhance teacher trainees' interpersonal skills, ultimately shaping them into skilled and high-quality educators. Mastery of interpersonal communication skills should be a priority for teacher trainees to optimize the potential of Generation Z and Alpha in Malaysia. These skills will serve as valuable assets for trainees as they navigate their roles in society and support future generations.

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